

Implications of Intra-Ethnic Marginalization among the Ameru People of Kenya from 1957 to 2022

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to investigate the implications of the intra-ethnic marginalization among the Ameru people of Kenya. During the pre-European period, Kenya and most of other parts of the country including Meru sub-ethnic groups exhibited egalitarian democratic system, although negligible elements of inequality were reported. This state of affair was abruptly altered by the advent of the colonial rule which was the hallmark of exclusion and discrimination. Areas perceived to be productive received more government resources in form agricultural inputs and machinery, industries, roads and electricity while neglecting the less agricultural potential regions like Northern Frontier District (NFD). The area of the study was the greater Meru region that consists of the Meru and Tharaka-Nithi counties. The descriptive research design was used because this is qualitative study. The study employed the instrumentalist theory. The data was collected from oral, archival and secondary sources. Purposive and snowballing techniques were adopted. Research instruments employed comprised the interview schedules and focus group discussions. The study found that the Ameru people during the pre-colonial period embraced the concepts of inclusivity, equity and fairness. It emerged that the issues of intra-ethnic marginalization in Meru occurred immediately after colonial period. The post-colonial governments inherited the practice of marginalization which is in place up to date. It was found that this form of marginalization had far-reaching consequences such as uneven sharing of the resources and power, underdevelopment, land alienation by unscrupulous prominent people, widespread absolute poverty, mass destruction of property and loss of lives, hatred and animosity.

Keywords: intra-ethnic marginalization, egalitarian democratic system, sub-ethnic groups, exclusion and discrimination

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The inclusion and participation of all members of the community in the policy formulation and decision making process in all matters of governance is critical not only in accelerating socio-political and economic developments but also creating a one united and unbreakable society that cares for the wellbeing of the people irrespective of their gender, background, race, social status and ethnicity. The Kenyan Constitution guarantees equal representation of both the minority and majority groups in running the affairs of the two levels of the government. Although this has been attained to some level at ethnic level, much is required to be done to fully achieve fair representation and participation of all sub-ethnic groups at national and local levels of governance. National and local resources and power has not been equitably shared among all the sub-ethnic groups that make up the Meru tribe. It is against this background the researcher carried out a study on the Implications of the Intra-Ethnic Marginalization among the Meru people of Kenya (1957-2022).

INTRODUCTION

Parsons (2012) notes that the Meru ethnic group is made up of nine sub-ethnic groups. The Imenti, Tigania, Igembe, Igoji and Miutine are currently living in Meru county. Miutine and Igoji however, are commonly grouped together with the South Imenti. On the other hand, the Tharaka, Chuka, Muthambi and Mwimbi reside in Tharaka-Nithi county. According to Berman (1990), the modern ethnicities particularly in Africa finds its origin from the colonial rule. He posits that the colonial socio-economic, cultural and political forces influenced the form, scope and content of the ethnic character of the pre-European societies in Africa. The construction of the ethnicity occurs in the communities with conflicting aspects of custom and culture, and divergent interests and aspirations as well as the conflicts of gender, class, faction and generation. Lays (1975) states that it is important to understand that it is the colonialism that reinforced and separated ethnic groups; the colonial policies inadvertently favored some communities while at the same time excluded and discriminated others. During the colonial period, though the African societies experienced peaceful and harmonious co-existences, inter and intra-ethnic conflicts were also experienced but in minimal percentage (Mutiso, 1975). The Kenyan constitution provides for the ethnic inclusion, however, the empirical evidence indicates the existence of internal complexities within an ethnic group. Although, the dominant groups take more than 70% of the legally allowed job allocation in counties, some sub-ethnic groups still experience some kind of exclusion and marginalization. However, most of the counties claims that the dominant group includes both minority and majority sub-ethnic group. Although there was a higher representation of diversity when county governments' employees were projected together, when plotted against the national population, county employment has completely excluded some minority groups such as the Change, Lejem, Bagareh and Gajeel (NCIC, 2016). According to NGEN (2017), during the pre-colonial period the Northern Kenya Region was known as the Northern Frontier District (NFD) and was treated exclusively. There was restriction of movement to and from the district. One could only enter or come out under a special pass. Such repressive colonial legislation was intended to lock out the NFD from other parts of the country. This situation continued even after the independence. The NFD had no contact or relation with other parts of the Kenya. During this entire period, the area received no constructive development; the region seriously suffered from underdevelopment in all aspects of life. The government didn't support the construction of markets for the livestock industry, which was and is still the main economic activity of the people of NFD. There has been no effort done to exploit the immense potential in the livestock sector, regardless of the fact that agriculture is the backbone of the Kenyan economy. This state of underdevelopment is the best evidence of marginalization of people and region. According to Cederman et al. (2013) there exists a close association between access to state or public resources and the political representation. The writers note that distance to power is connected to higher level of conflicts. In the same vein, under-representation in policy making process and limited access to state institution can be perceived as a collective injustice which can increase the chances of conflict. According to Kanyinga (2014), there has been a tendency that after every election marginalized groups and under-developed regions blame successive governments for failure to invest resources in their regions. This has intensified regional conflicts. The author further notes that 'it is our turn to eat' becomes a slogan for bringing ethnic groups together with the view to gain access to and control of political power. Accordingly, leaders appointed to office are seen to be individuals who favor tribesmen and share the national cake with a select few who in turn become wealthy. In some cases, ethnic blocks are formed on the basis of sharing power and socio-economic development.

Objective

The objective of this study was to evaluate the implications of the intra ethnic marginalization among the Ameru people of Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in the greater Meru region consisting the counties of Tharaka-Nithi and Meru. The researcher adopted the descriptive research design which enabled the researcher to collect, analyze and present the data as it exists. The data was collected from the oral and secondary sources. Secondary data was gathered from books, journals, internet and thesis. Informative elderly respondents were interviewed for oral data. The study used purposive and snowballing techniques to sample the respondents. The researcher identified and

sampled one hundred informants. Four groups discussions were organized and detailed discussion was held. To analyze the data, the researcher employed the instrumentalist theory whose proponents argues that the political elites and prominent groups in the society use ethnicity as a tool for political mobilization for self-serving interests such as leadership positions in the government and accumulation of wealth.

Key findings

Marigu (O.I, April, 2025) notes that Hon. Bernard Mate was the first MP to represent the Meru people in the Legislative Council in 1957. Mr. Bernard Mate initiated several development projects across the greater Meru region. However, the situation changed when Hon. Jackson Angaine was elected as the second MP in the greater Meru region and subsequent appointment to the powerful ministerial post, the Ministry of Lands and Settlement. Mr. Jackson Angaine overshadowed Hon. Bernard Mate political influence in the region despite Hon. Bernard Mate being the most educated individual at that period. Mr. Angaine advanced the politics of marginalization where he consolidated many of development projects to his tribesmen, the Imenti people. For instance, he gave parcels of land to Imenti people in areas like Timau and Subuiga, areas which were formerly occupied by the white settlers. The Imenti people were first to be issued with title deeds while other areas followed later though in snail's pace.

In corroborating the above data, Mukaria (O.I, April, 2025) a former counsellor notes that Hon. Kiraitu and Hon. Angaine furthered discriminatory and divisive leadership during their tenure as ministers in previous governments. For example, the Tharaka people lobbied for the tarmacking of 63 Kms road from Marimanti to Nkubu through Mukuyu jwa Kigonko junction during President Kibaki's tour in Tharaka. The President came to Tharaka to officially launch the first ever government-sponsored installation of electricity project in Marimanti market as he sought for his second term re-election in 2007. In the meeting there were other prominent political leaders from greater Meru region including Hon. Kiraitu Murungi. When Hon. Kiraitu rose to address the public (as minister of energy) the crowds heckled him uncontrollably only for the President to request him to cut short his speech and sit down. The heckling was as result of Hon. Kiraitu referring Tharaka residents as *mungiki* while in Parliament following the Tharaka and Imenti clash over land dispute. Whether or not Hon. Kiraitu decided to punish the residents of Tharaka for the hostile reception, only Nkubu to Mitunguu, a small section of the lobbied road (covering only the area occupied by Imenti) was tarmacked. Up to date the remaining part covering the Lower Imenti (Kiagu) and Tharaka region has never been tarmacked 18 years down the line.

The intra-ethnic marginalization was clearly witnessed among the Meru sub-ethnic groups. Of the nine Meru sub-ethnic groups, the Tharaka was the most affected especially on the issue of infrastructure (Middleton and Kershaw, 1972). The aforementioned assertion is supported by Icheria (2015) who states that the Tharaka region was extremely remote and underdeveloped. By the time this research was done, there was no single tarmac road in Tharaka constituency despite all other Meru sub-tribes having at least one all-weather road. For the record, installation of electricity in the areas was done by Kenya Rural Electrification Authority in 2002 through the presidents Mwai Kibaki Rural Electricity Program. In this program, Chiakariga, Marimanti and Gatunga markets were connected to electricity. Tunyai market had been connected to the electricity by Brother John who was the Materi Girls Centre Patron as he supplied the power to the school. By 2010, there were only two irrigation projects in the entire Tharaka region—one at Kithino while the other at Igumo.

According to FGD held in Igembe North constituency in the former Nyonyiri constituency, the Igembe people have suffered social and political marginalization since independence. The region has been locked out of essential state and county resources. Such developments include limited employment opportunities such as state job appointments, absence of higher learning institutions like teacher training colleges (TTC), and universities, lack of good transport networks, health facilities and understaffing in schools in the area is alarming. The respondents believe that this state of affairs has been exacerbated by lack of proper representation at the national government. For instance, Teachers Service Commission appointments letters were being given to MPs who later gave them to their residents but they did not see their representatives distribute them.

Like in other parts of Kenya, the struggle for government resources may have exacerbated conflict over public utilities between the Tharaka and Tigania especially when one community felt that a public utility was developed using public funds only to benefit only one community. Such feelings propagate injustice, corruption, and ethnic politics, which perpetuate rivalry over jobs, land, business opportunities, public utilities, and other resources (Wamwere, 2008). These lead to social and economic marginalization of communities, economic disparities, rise in poverty levels, and inequitable distribution of resources and services. Politics was instrumental in these conflicts. The residents of Tigania and Tharaka regions are marginalized by the government in the distribution of the national resources. This is mainly because development in Kenya was determined by 'who is who' in the political leadership and the political party the leader subscribes to. The regions that were perceived to be opposition sympathizers and/or elected leaders from the opposition political party to parliament had their areas neglected.

Gitonga (O.I, April, 2025) alludes that there were limited number of schools in Tigania, Igembe and Tharaka. This challenge was compounded by lack of trained teachers during the colonial and post-colonial period up to 1990s. Due to the shortage of the qualified teachers, majority of the teachers posted in these areas came from Imenti, Mwimbi and Igoji. Absenteeism was also a common phenomenon among these tutors. The alien teachers would come on Monday evening and leave on Thursday evening. This is a clear indication that social developments such as education was limited among these sub-groups owing to the political marginalization subjected to them by the colonial and post-colonial governments. The data is supported by KNA/DC/MRU/2/1 that reports that Mr. Hopkins of the Methodist Mission prepared a map of the Meru District showing existing schools in the District. The map indicated that a very high proportion of schools were in Imenti, Mwimbi and Chuka, followed by Tigania and Igembe, and Tharaka taking the last position with only one S.D.A school at Chiakariga.

The initial stage of land demarcation and adjudication was done by the Agikuyu who had acquired such skills while serving their jail term in prison following the declaration of state of emergency and subsequent arrest of many Kikuyu people (Nkirote, O. I, April, 2025). Since not many of the residents of Meru knew the value of land, majority of the political and business elites acquired chunks of land through dubious means. The local people did not understand the importance of having a title deed. Therefore, the seasoned politicians and their allies manipulated the process of land demarcation and adjudication for personal gain. This was the genesis of the perennial land conflicts in Meru. The respondent further believes that many of the conflicts witnessed today among the Meru sub-ethnic groups stem from the contagious land issue. Notably, land is a scarce resource and continues to be limited as time goes by. The challenge is even compounded by the fact that the population is rapidly growing while the size of the land remains the same. The land demarcation and adjudication began during the colonial period which was passed on to the Africans during the post-war era.

For over decades, land disputes persisted between the Meru and Tharaka. The persistence of conflict between the Tharaka and Meru over land boundary had devastating consequences on both regions. Notable results were loss of lives, destruction of property and stalling of development projects. For instance, in 2008, the building of the police station and the installation of electricity at Gatithini market was disrupted due to land related conflict between two sub groups of Meru; the Tigania and Tharaka (Gatabi, O.I., April, 2025). The issue of land-related conflicts emanates from inequality in demarcation, adjudication and issuance of the title deeds, a process which was influenced by the prominent politicians.

Nderitu (O, I, May 2025) claimed that although other Meru sub-ethnic groups believe that all the Imenti people benefited more because of their prominent leaders who served in various administrations, Kiagu residents (Imenti) have not enjoyed any privilege from the government. Moreover, the residents point out that essential social and political resources have been concentrated along and beyond the Embu-Chuka-Meru tarmac road, the region mainly occupied by the Imenti sub-ethnic group. For instance, Hon. Kiraitu Murungi, Hon. David Mwiraria, Hon. Muthaura, Mr. Itere and Prof. Kaimenyi and Prof. Kobia who served in previous governments all hail from the upper part of Imenti. The lower Imenti have been neglected completely. The prominent politicians especially those from Imenti usually remember there is a place called Kiagu when they are in vote hunting mission.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it is evident that there existed intra-ethnic marginalization among the Ameru of Kenya. As the paper reports the exclusion and discrimination of some Meru sub-ethnic groups as observed in various spheres of life had numerous implications on the Meru people. It has emerged that one of notable consequence of the intra-ethnic marginalization among the Ameru people was the underrepresentation of some Meru sub-ethnic groups such as Tigania, Tharaka, Igembe, Chuka and Muthambi in political in governance. It was also noted that land related disputes were common due to land grabbing. Rightful land owners were forcefully displaced from their ancestral lands. The paper also found that there was unequal distribution of nation and county resources and power where the minority groups got almost nothing while the majority groups scooping nearly everything. This further exacerbated suspicion and hatred among the Meru people. Other implications of intra-ethnic marginalization among the Ameru are the destruction of property and loss of lives.

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